

The Contribution of Emotional Experience to Religious Belief and Practice: a  
Theological and Philosophical Analysis, with Particular Reference to the Thought of  
William James

Submitted by Johannes De Bie to the University of Exeter  
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## Abstract

The thesis begins by distinguishing a number of theories of emotion in the work of William James. In 'What is an Emotion?' and *Principles of Psychology* [PP], James argues that all of our emotional feelings begin in the body. From this point of view, the emotions are connected directly to behaviour and evaluation, rather than having their origins in theory or a mere description of the world. In 'The Will to Believe' [WTB], James suggests that religious belief can make pragmatic sense, rather as choosing a path down a mountainside when uncertain of the correct route makes good practical sense. So here again, James's account of emotion is related to the requirements of action rather than theory. In 'The Sentiment of Rationality' [SR], James connects the emotions to action, only here the action is thinking itself. So in this way too, the emotions have a key part to play if we are to orient ourselves properly in the world. Finally, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [VRE], James turns explicitly to the role of emotion in religious contexts, and thinks of the emotions as providing the ultimate source of religion and of theological reflection. These issues are addressed in the first chapter of the thesis.

In Chapter 2, I review the modern literature on emotion, and consider its relationship to James's thought. Two central conclusions emerge. First, bodily feelings do indeed have an integral part to play in our emotional life, as Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux have proposed. Secondly, as Peter Goldie and John Deigh have argued, we need not think of emotional feelings as simply directed towards the body. As Robert Solomon has noted, these two sides of our emotional life can be connected because responses of the body can themselves imply some understanding of the world, and what sort of practical response to the world is appropriate.

In Chapter 3, I consider some theological literature on the emotions, and consider how James's ideas may be understood in the light of this literature. John Henry Newman allows us to see how the idea of 'feeling towards' can be applied to experience of God. And Jonathan Edwards agrees with James that religious belief is inherently emotional and practical. Rudolf Otto's approach agrees with James in placing emotional feeling at the root of religion, rather than doctrine or non-emotional perception.

In Chapter 4, I consider how the models of emotional experience that I have identified in James's works PP, WTB, and SR can all be confirmed in some way by using the examples of emotional experience that he provides in VRE. The overall conclusion of the thesis is James's account of the relationship between emotion and religion is still of relevance today, and can still help us to understand particular examples of religious experience. James's approach can be corroborated, and extended, in various ways, using the philosophical and theological literature; and it can be confirmed by reference to some of the firsthand accounts of religious experience that James himself provides in VRE.

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